During the 1997 general election campaign in Ireland, the deputy leader of Fianna Fáil, Mary O’Rourke, told a seminar on unemployment organised by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions that her party had more in common with the Labour Party on the question of unemployment than it had with its prospective coalition partners, the Progressive Democrats. Flatly rejecting the Progressive Democrats’ proposals to shed 25,000 jobs in the public sector, she projected Fianna Fáil as the defender of the public sector. Her remarks were, of course, a classic example of Fianna Fáil tactics and rhetoric. By ‘muddying the waters’ of those who sought to portray the election as a contest between a centre-left rainbow coalition and a centre-right Fianna Fáil–Progressive Democrats alignment, she emphasised Fianna Fáil’s ability to face both ‘left’ and ‘right’ simultaneously. The statement indicated to the trade union movement that Fianna Fáil, which has continued to win more working-class votes than the Labour Party and Democratic Left combined, understood the economic concerns of both the unemployed and public sector worker components of its cross-class electoral bloc. Thereby setting limits to the extent to which that cross-class electoral bloc would be endangered by the pursuit of orthodox economic liberalism.

The political instincts displayed by Mary O’Rourke were honed during the first two decades of the country’s independence when the foundations of Fianna Fáil’s always dominant and at times hegemonic role in Irish political life were established. Fianna Fáil’s achievement during those early decades was the deployment of a political strategy which enabled it to supersede the tensions within a class bloc composed of potentially fissile elements. This ensured its passage to power, by placing opponents on a more or less permanently reactive and
defensive footing. But just what type of party did emerge as the domi-
nant political force in the Ireland of the 1930s and ever since? The ‘enigma’ of Fianna Fáil has been evident in its apparent success in
eluding attempts by political scientists at classification according to
existing typologies of political parties. In this chapter I wish to exam-
ine the Fianna Fáil enigma by raising some questions about the nature
of the party during those formative years, the importance of party
strategy, and the relationship of parties to social class.

These are questions which have been explored in my recently pub-
lished study of Fianna Fáil, a work greatly influenced by what the
Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci had to say about the study of
political parties. Gramsci cautions that any attempt to construct the
history of a political party which consists of a ‘simple narrative of the
internal life of a political organisation…how it comes into existence,
the first groups which constitute it, the ideological controversies
through which its programme and its conception of the world and of
life are formed’ may result in ‘a history of certain intellectual groups,
or even sometimes the political biography of a single personality’. The
‘vaster and more comprehensive framework’ he commends instead,
would focus on the mass of people who have given the founders of the
party their ‘trust, loyalty and discipline. Or criticised them ‘realisti-
cally’ by dispersing or remaining passive before certain initiatives. Even
this does not signify merely active members of the party: it is not suffi-
cient when constructing a party’s history to focus solely on party con-
gresses, votes, and so on. Rather one needs to ‘take some account of
the social group of which the party in question is the expression and
the most advanced element. The history of a party, in other words, can
only be the history of a particular social group’.

Two other things are striking about Gramsci’s analysis. First, his
insistence that as any social group is not isolated, but locked in
co-operation and competition with others, then

the history of any party can only emerge from the complex por-
trayal of the totality of society and State (often with international
ramifications too). Hence it may be said that to write the history of
a party means nothing less than to write the general history of
a country from a monographic viewpoint, in order to highlight a
particular aspect of it.

And second, that one should strive not to be distracted by ‘mystic
enthusiasm’ for ‘petty internal matters’ from the overall picture of how